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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the need for and importance of integrating nutrition education into the existing preschool curriculum. Following a brief definition of nutrition education according to the White House Conference on Food, Nutrition, and Health, discussion focuses on determining who is responsible for nutrition education. It is argued that, although parents certainly play a major role in the nutritional care and education of their children, educators, administrators, classroom teachers, and other school personnel must also assume much of the responsibility for making nutrition education more meaningful. The author concludes by demonstating how, through integration of the nutrition education into the existing preschool curriculum areas, children can enrich their experiences in language, social living, mathematics, science, and aesthetics. (MP)

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ADMINSTRATORS' PERSPECTIVE: INTEGRATING NUTRITION EDUCATION INTO THE PRESCHOOL CURRICULUM

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The passing of Public Law 95-166, the National School Lunch Act and Child Nutrition Admendments by the 95th Congress in 1977, has radically changed the thrust of nutrition education. "The intent of the legislation was to teach children through positive daily luchroom experience an appropriate classroom reinforcement the value of a nutritionally-balanced diet and to develop curricula and materials to train teachers and food service personnel to carry out this task" (Maretyki, 1979). While nutrition education is not a new concept, new publications, new research studies, and a wealth of new programmed materials are currently available. A concerted effort is being made to better educate the public about nutrition. So that there is a greater awareness of the importance of "good" nutrition, nutrition education is being included in the curricula, preschool through twelfth grade.

What Is Nutrition Education?

While there seems not be a universal definition for nutrition education, the term may be defined as the primary method for improving knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors of individuals about nutrition. Nutrition is defined as the process by which food, when eaten, nurses the body.

The White House Conference on Food, Nutrition, and Health (1969) identified the following as four major concepts of nutrition education:

1. Nutrition is the food we eat and how the body uses it. We eat food to live, grow, keep healthy, and have energy for work and play.
2. Food is made up of nutrients. Each nutrient has a specific use, the basic four food groups give a balance of food.

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3. All people throughout life, need the same nutrients, but in different amounts.

4. The way the food is handled influences the amount of nutrients in food, its safety, appearance, and taste. Food is grown, processed, and prepared. (Seefelt, 1980)

Who Is Responsible For Nutrition Education?

No on institution, group, or individual has the total responsibility for nutrition education. Parents certainly play a major role in the nutritional care and education of children early in the child's life. Food habits, good or bad, and attitudes toward foods are established early. Nestor and Glotzer (1981) believed that, "the family establishes the patterns for many of the child's feeding activities and can influence eating patterns through the degree of flexibility allowed the child in developing his own food preferences."

Because such attitudes, habits, and preferences are established early in a child's life, it does not necessarily mean that they are nutritionally sound. Unwise food choices are made by some parents because of needs and wants but perhaps because of the lack of information about the proper nutrients needed for the body.

Educators, administrators, classroom teachers, and other school personnel certainly must assume much of the responsibility for nutrition education. Educators are responsible for "filling in the gap between the mere knowledge and application in daily patterns of eating" (Nestor & Glotzer, 1981).

If educators accept the responsibility for making nutrition education more meaningful, strategies must be planned for integrating it into the curriculum early. For good food habits developed early can be an exit to health and happiness in later life.

How Can Nutrition Education Be Integrated Into Preschool Curriculum?

What does the term curriculum mean? Some defined curriculum as all experiences a child has in and out of school. Others believed curriculum to be a "specified set of activities designed for the children to experience at school in order to reach certain goals or to make constructive gains, educationally, socially, emotionally" (Margolin, 1976). There is common agreement that experiences are a vital part of a curriculum for young children.

So that there is some order and some method of evaluating what a child learns from these experiences, categories of teaching and learning encounters become important. The curriculum is a well conceived yet flexible framework of planned and vicarious experiences. A preschool curriculum could be viewed as a giant puzzle interlaced with opportunities for cognitive, affective and psychomotor development.

It is generally agreed that children learn best through feeling, smelling, testing, and viewing. They learn by becoming involved, by doing something. If the puzzle is going to be more than just a puzzle, it must also be interwined with first-hand experiences which provide opportunities for children to develop communication skills, sensory perceptional awareness, psychomotor skills, social living skills, and personal fulfillment feelings. It is most important that the curriculum provide children with an opportunity to make decisions, solve problems and develop such life skills as loving, creating, and valuing (Berman, 1968).

Nutrition education can be incorporated and integrated into all areas of the curriculum. The curriculum provides an opportunity to not only acquire new knowledge and information about food, but to establish a support system for developing and practicing good eating habits. Nutrition education should become an integral part of the child's everyday living experiences.

Integration Of Nutrition Education In Curriculum Areas

Language Experience

Children develop listening, speaking, reading and writing skills through language experiences. Listening and speaking are thought to be skills most often included in the curriculum at the preschool level.

What better way to introduce nutrition education to young children than through their experiences with language. Listening can be a time when children engage in identifying and differentiating between cooking and other food sounds like popping, sizzling, crunching, and crackling. All can be used to increase audio-perceptual skills in young children. Children enjoy cooking and cooking activities and when such experiences are planned and properly supervised, they can be valuable and most rewarding. Children develop a whole new vocabulary of food related words such as:

bake	dark	juicy	oil	sift
beat	dinner	knife	pan	snack
boil	dry	light	pat	soft
butter	folk	liquid	plate	sour
cold	fry	lunch	raw	spread
cook	fruit	meat	roll	sprinkle
cover	grate	menu	receipt	stove
cut	hard	mix	salty	sweet
cup	hot	oleo	sharp	taste
				vegetables

Words suggesting colors become more meaningful as they are related to certain foods.

COLORS	FOOD	COLORS	FOOD
orange	orange pumpkin	purple	plum eggplant
yellow	lemon pineapple	green	celery beans peas
red	apple cabbage radish	brown	potatoes coconut
		white	milk cauliflower

Children learn that some foods are one color on the outside and another on the inside. They learn that some foods are one color when ripe and another when not ripe. They, also, learn that some foods must be cooked before eating while others can be eaten without being cooked.

Social Living Experience

The social learning experience is considered by some to be the most important area of the preschool curriculum, since home and family are a vital part of the young child's life. Meaningful opportunities for children to develop problem solving and decision-making skills can be provided through social learning experiences. In learning about food, children can make decisions about the foods they should eat, prepare, and even grow. Very early children can develop an awareness of the relationship among good eating habits, good nutrition, and a healthy body. Problem solving skills, also, can be reinforced and practiced in cooking and making food choices. Many children are fascinated by cooking, which should go beyond just being fun, for all of the "process skills" can be brought into play in an environment that is both enjoyable and conceptual."

Mathematical Experience

Mathematics concepts can be easily integrated into the preschool nutrition education program. Classroom cooking experiences provide an opportunity to count, compare, classify, order, categorize, and sort. Opposite words become a part of the vocabulary. Words can help to develop these mathematical concepts:

half	whole	long	flat
little	big	short	square
heavy	light	round	

Children learn to add and take away from; they learn less than and more than; "how much, how much more and how much less."

Science Experience

The science corner is an ideal place to help children develop scientific concepts (e.g., discovery, experimenting and testing). They learn that matter changes from one state to another as they pop the corn, freeze the ice cream, make candles from candle wax. Additionally, they can observe other changes as they make jello, puddings and milk shakes. Children learn best if they engage in the action.

Aesthetic Experience

Music and art experiences that teach nutrition education can fit neatly into the young child's curriculum. Children enjoy music and songs for it is a means of communicating. It is fun to create new songs about food and to act them out. "Singing and dancing are important not only because they provide an important means of expression from children who understand new concepts" (Goodwin & Pollen, 1980).

Art activities may involve, painting a picture of a child's favorite food, making a collage of each of the four food groups, or selecting foods that are usually eaten for breakfast, lunch, or dinner. Block paints using vegetables make an interesting art activity. Children learn to discriminate by color, shape, and size.

Nutrition education can be effectively integrated into the curriculum. Healthy attitudes and behaviors, toward food, can be and should be developed early for lasting effect. The major goals of nutrition as defined by the White House Conference on Food, Nutrition and Health can be accomplished through planned and vicarious experiences throughout the curriculum. Parents and educators, as well, are equally responsible for nutrition education in and out of the classroom.

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